THE DHAMMA PARADOX

Imperial Belief Management and Its Consequences in Ashoka's Mauryan Empire, c. 268–185 BCE

PART ONE

The Governance Problem and the Dhamma Solution

Thomas J. Bryan, Claude/Anthropic

Sometime around 258 BCE, a bilingual inscription was carved into rock in the district of Kandahar, in the territory the Greeks called Arachosia and that Ashoka had inherited as part of his enormous empire. One face of the inscription was in Greek, the other in Aramaic. Both conveyed the same message: that the king known as Piyadasi, Beloved of the Gods, had given up the slaughter of living creatures, that his physicians and veterinary officers now traveled the roads tending to sick animals and humans alike, that the king urged all people toward what the Greek text called eusebeia — piety, right conduct, a term that any educated Greek of the third century BCE would have recognized immediately as a well-established virtue within his own philosophical tradition. The inscription contains no mention of the Buddha, no Buddhist doctrinal term, no reference to the sangha or to nirvana or to the Four Noble Truths. If you encountered it knowing nothing about its author, you would have no way of identifying it as the work of a Buddhist king. You might reasonably classify it as a Hellenistic philosophical text, perhaps the royal proclamation of some cosmopolitan monarch who had absorbed the ethical vocabulary of the Mediterranean philosophical schools.

This is the Kandahar Edict's analytical gift: it reveals, in a single artifact, the governing contradiction at the heart of Ashoka's entire belief program. Ashoka was, by all available evidence, a genuinely committed Buddhist. He left separate edicts addressed specifically to the Buddhist monastic community, using technical Buddhist vocabulary and discussing Buddhist institutional governance in ways that confirm his personal engagement with the tradition. He funded the construction of stupas across his empire on a scale that dwarfed any previous royal Buddhist patronage. He made pilgrimage to the sites associated with the Buddha's life and had pillars erected at those locations. And yet the public edicts he inscribed on rock faces and pillars across an empire stretching from Afghanistan to Karnataka, addressed to the full spectrum of his subjects, contain no Buddhist doctrine whatsoever. The Greek translators at Kandahar found no Buddhist content to translate. There was none to find.

The question that the Kandahar Edict forces into focus is therefore not the question the hagiographic tradition — Buddhist and secular alike — has tended to ask: Was Ashoka sincere? Did his conversion represent a genuine spiritual transformation? The more analytically productive question is: Why did a sincere Buddhist king construct an imperial belief system from which Buddhism had been systematically removed? What governance problem was dhamma — the deliberately vague, deliberately universal, deliberately non-sectarian moral framework of the public edicts — designed to solve? And what does the solution reveal about the relationship between belief and power in the third century BCE Indian subcontinent? These are the questions this study addresses. They lead to conclusions that complicate the canonical image of Ashoka as the philosopher-king whose Buddhist conscience transformed imperial governance, without requiring the cynical alternative that his conversion was entirely performance. The framework that makes those complications visible does not require deciding whether Ashoka's spiritual experience was authentic. It requires only attending to what dhamma did — materially, politically, institutionally — and to what happened when the military force that underlay the entire arrangement changed sides.

Section I: Foundation Conditions — The Empire That Needed a Belief System

The Scale and Diversity Problem

The Mauryan Empire at Ashoka's accession, around 268 BCE, was the largest political entity the Indian subcontinent had ever produced. Its territory ran from the Hindu Kush and the northwestern frontier zones where Alexander's campaigns had recently passed through the entire Gangetic plain, across the Deccan plateau's northern reaches, and into the Kalinga territory on the Bay of Bengal that Ashoka would subsequently conquer. Modern estimates of the empire's population range from thirty to sixty million, a figure that reflects genuine scholarly uncertainty about ancient Indian demography rather than false precision in either direction. The more certain figure is the administrative challenge: Ashoka governed more linguistic communities, more distinct religious traditions, more varied social structures, and more different pre-existing relationships to Magadhan imperial authority than any ruler of the subcontinent before him had needed to manage.

The religious landscape across this territory was not a unified field that any single belief system could straightforwardly claim. Brahminical religious culture — organized around the Vedic textual tradition, the sacrificial ritual system, the authority of hereditary Brahmin priests, and the varna social hierarchy that placed Brahmins at its apex — was the dominant legitimating framework across the Gangetic plain and the empire's older, more settled territories. It was not a centralized institution with a single head or a unified doctrinal authority; it was a distributed network of priestly families, gurukulas (schools of religious learning), temple institutions, and patron-client relationships between rulers and Brahmin scholars that had been developing for centuries before the Mauryan Empire existed. Its reach was deep in the social fabric — Brahmin priests performed the rituals that marked birth, marriage, and death, adjudicated questions of caste purity and social status, and provided the religious legitimation that made a king's authority recognizable as legitimate rather than merely coercive. Any emperor who alienated this network did so at significant political cost.

Against this Brahminical background, the shramana movements — the various traditions of wandering ascetics who had, over the preceding three centuries, mounted systematic theological and social challenges to Vedic authority — had developed substantial institutional presence and popular support, particularly in urban merchant communities that found in the shramana traditions a spiritual framework more suited to their social experience than the Brahmin-controlled sacrificial system. Buddhism, one of the most organizationally sophisticated of these shramana movements, had by Ashoka's time developed a monastic institution — the sangha — with considerable internal coherence, a growing canon of texts recording the Buddha's teachings, and established networks of monastery-based communities across the Gangetic plain and beyond. Jainism had a comparable institutional structure and a particularly strong presence among merchant communities in the western and central regions of the empire. The Ajivikas — a third major shramana movement, now almost entirely lost to history because their texts did not survive the subsequent millennium — apparently had substantial following and royal patronage in some regions. These traditions were not marginal; they represented serious intellectual and organizational alternatives to the Brahminical framework and had been gaining social traction for generations.

Beyond the Gangetic heartland, the empire's diversity compounded. The northwestern territories that Chandragupta had absorbed from Alexander's successors — the regions of Gandhara, Arachosia, and Bactria — contained Greek settler communities with their own philosophical and religious traditions, Aramaic-speaking populations whose cultural world connected to the Persian and Near Eastern horizons, and Iranian-influenced local elites who had spent generations navigating between Achaemenid, Macedonian, and now Mauryan authority. The Deccan frontier zones and the far south, which Ashoka's edicts acknowledge but whose populations remained only partially integrated into the empire's administrative core, contained

communities whose social structures operated largely outside both Brahminical and Buddhist frameworks. Governing all of these populations through a single legitimating ideology was not a problem that any ruler before Ashoka had faced at this scale, and the Mauryan state's pre-Ashokan approach to that problem had been emphatically not ideological.

The Arthashastra State: Surveillance, Extraction, and the Naked Instrument

The state that Chandragupta Maurya founded, on which Bindusara built, and which Ashoka inherited, was organized around two governing principles that the Arthashastra tradition — the body of statecraft theory most closely associated with the Mauryan period, however precisely one dates its specific textual form — articulates with unusual frankness: danda, the rod of force, and artha, material welfare and wealth. The Arthashastra's theory of kingship is instrumental throughout. The king rules not because he embodies cosmic order or divine will but because he maintains the capacity for coercion that prevents social dissolution and enables the extraction that funds the apparatus. The text discusses the management of religious specialists with the same administrative logic it applies to spies, treasury officials, and provincial governors: as assets to be cultivated, managed, and deployed for state purposes. Priests and monks appear in the Arthashastra as potential intelligence sources, as legitimation resources, as threats to be monitored when their institutional independence becomes a political problem. There is no romantic idealization of religion in the text; there is only the question of how it can be made useful to the ruler.

The Arthashastra's dating has been the subject of serious scholarly debate, and Patrick Olivelle's meticulous 2013 analysis establishes persuasively that the text as we have it represents a compilation and redaction reaching its substantially final form in the first to third centuries CE, centuries after Chandragupta's reign. This conclusion matters and cannot be set aside. But it does not mean that the Arthashastra is irrelevant to the Mauryan period. What Olivelle's work establishes is that the text represents the *systematization* of a statecraft tradition whose constituent elements were circulating and being debated from the Mauryan period onward. The tradition's core insights — about surveillance, about managing religious institutions, about the relationship between force and legitimation — were not invented in the Gupta period. They were compiled and organized in a final authoritative form during that period. The Mauryan state that Chandragupta built was recognizably the state that the Arthashastra tradition describes: a professional bureaucracy administering a surveillance apparatus, managing the religious landscape instrumentally, and extracting revenue through a systematic multi-channel fiscal system. Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador who visited Chandragupta's court, describes a heavily regimented capital city, an elaborate royal protection apparatus, an administrative class of considerable sophistication, and a ruler who slept in different chambers on different nights to confuse potential assassins — consistent with the Arthashastra's picture of a state organized around protecting the ruler and managing potential threats through institutional mechanisms rather than ideological consensus.

Chandragupta's reported conversion to Jainism near the end of his life — the tradition that he abdicated, traveled south with a Jain teacher, and died a Jain ascetic practicing the ritual fast of sallekhana — is analytically interesting precisely for what it did not produce. If Chandragupta experienced a genuine religious transformation, it had no effect on the institutional character of the state he left his son Bindusara. The surveillance apparatus continued. The professional army continued. The extraction machinery continued. Bindusara, who reportedly had his own religious preferences that may have run toward the Ajivikas, governed through the same mechanisms his father had built. The Mauryan state's institutional structure was robust enough to persist through its founder's personal religious evolution because that structure was not

dependent on the ruler's personal religious commitments for its functional logic. It ran on force and revenue, and those required no theological foundation.

This is the baseline from which Ashoka's dhamma program must be understood: not as a natural evolution of an already religiously-inflected state but as a significant departure from a state that had been, by design, ideologically naked at its core. The question of why Ashoka chose to construct a legitimating ideology — when his grandfather and father had successfully governed without one — is one of the study's central questions, and the answer is embedded in the governance problem that the empire's scale and diversity had made acute in ways that Chandragupta's smaller, newer empire had not yet fully confronted.

The Succession Problem: Violence as the Foundation

Ashoka's accession to the Mauryan throne was not a smooth dynastic transition. The Buddhist sources describe him killing ninety-nine half-brothers to secure his position; the number carries the arithmetic of legend rather than history, but the pattern it describes — violent elimination of rival claimants during a contested succession — is consistent with Mauryan political practice and implausible to dismiss entirely. There appears to have been a two to four year interregnum between Bindusara's death and Ashoka's coronation, a gap that suggests a period of competition among claimants that was resolved through means the official record was subsequently motivated to minimize. A Sri Lankan chronicle tradition records that Ashoka was helped to power by a faction of five hundred ministers — suggesting an elite coalition dynamic whose composition and interests would have shaped the early years of his reign in ways the dhamma-focused edicts do not acknowledge.

This violence-at-the-foundation is not incidental background. It establishes that the man who would inscribe the renunciation of war and the promotion of non-violence in stone across his empire came to power through exactly the kind of dynastic violence that Mauryan political competition required. The contrast between the pre-dhamma Ashoka described in the Buddhist sources — cruel, militarily aggressive, governing a state apparatus whose Arthashastra character was unchanged from his predecessors — and the post-Kalinga Ashoka of the edicts is the transformation narrative that dhamma's public construction required. Understanding that narrative as a governance artifact — as the ideological statement through which a new legitimating framework was announced and institutionalized — does not require dismissing the possibility that Ashoka's personal religious experience was genuine. It requires only recognizing that the transformation narrative served political functions regardless of its biographical accuracy, and that analyzing those functions reveals the mechanism more clearly than the biographical question can.

The significance of the succession violence for what follows is institutional. Ashoka came to power owing debts to a coalition whose members had specific material interests in what his reign would provide. He governed a professional army whose commanders had their own hierarchy of loyalty and their own interests in the arrangement. He inherited a bureaucracy staffed by people whose positions depended on the continuation of the administrative apparatus and who had no particular investment in any specific ideological framework the ruler chose to promote. The dhamma program would be constructed on top of this institutional substrate — the army, the bureaucracy, the fiscal machinery, the intelligence apparatus — without changing any of it. That choice, whether conscious or structural, was the dhamma program's fundamental political vulnerability.

Kalinga and the Official Origin Story

Eight years after his coronation, Ashoka sent his armies into Kalinga — the territory corresponding to modern Odisha on the eastern coast of India, a rich agricultural and commercial region whose independent political status represented a gap in Mauryan control of the subcontinent's eastern seaboard and its Bay of Bengal trade. The campaign's outcome was complete military success and human catastrophe of a scale that the thirteenth major rock edict records with figures that, whatever their precision, are meant to convey enormous destruction: one hundred fifty thousand persons carried off as captives, one hundred thousand killed in the fighting, and many more dead from the displacement and disruption that followed. The Kalinga conquest completed the Mauryan Empire's territorial ambition; there were no remaining independent kingdoms on the subcontinent that represented comparable strategic targets.

The transformation narrative that follows in Edict XIII — the Beloved of the Gods was moved to profound sorrow and remorse by this conquest; he became intensely devoted to dhamma; he now regards dhamma conquest as superior to territorial conquest — is the foundational text of the Ashokan legend and deserves the most careful analytical reading the framework can provide. Two things can be simultaneously true: that Ashoka experienced something that felt to him like a genuine moral and spiritual crisis in response to Kalinga's destruction, and that the narrative of that crisis, as he chose to inscribe it in stone and distribute across his empire, served specific governance functions that would have operated regardless of the underlying psychological reality.

The governance functions of the Kalinga transformation narrative are not difficult to identify. It announces a policy change — no more military campaigning — and provides a moral framework for that announcement that is more politically durable than the actual strategic logic, which is simply that the empire was already as large as it could be efficiently administered, that further conquest would extend the logistical frontier beyond sustainable supply, and that the Kalinga campaign itself had been expensive in ways that the treasury would need time to recover from. Announcing the end of military expansion on strategic grounds invites questions about what happens when the strategic calculus changes. Announcing it on moral grounds — the ruler has been transformed; he now regards dhamma conquest as superior; he has taken a vow — creates a legitimating commitment that has political costs to revoke. The transformation narrative does political work that a purely strategic announcement could not do.

The transformation narrative also performs a second, subtler function: it distinguishes Ashoka from his predecessors and from the institutional logic of the state he inherited. Chandragupta and Bindusara were Arthashastra kings — rulers whose legitimating framework was purely instrumental. Ashoka is announcing that he is something different: a dhamma king, whose governance flows from a moral commitment rather than from the calculation of material advantage. This distinction, even if the underlying institutional apparatus remains unchanged, gives the population a different interpretive framework for their experience of imperial governance. The same tax collector appears differently if he is understood as an agent of a dhamma king rather than of an instrument of a revenue-maximizing state. The same road repaired by the state appears differently if it is understood as an act of the ruler's compassion rather than as maintenance of the military and commercial infrastructure. Dhamma is, among other things, a reinterpretation engine — a framework for making the same material arrangements mean something different to those subject to them.

Section II: Narrative Construction — Dhamma as Governance Technology

What Dhamma Was: The Systematic Omissions

Any serious reading of the edicts must begin with what they do not contain, because the omissions are more analytically revealing than the content. Across all fourteen major rock edicts, all seven pillar edicts, the minor rock edicts, and the separate edicts addressed to specific cities and communities, there is no mention of the Four Noble Truths. There is no mention of the Eightfold Path. There is no mention of nirvana or of the Buddhist doctrine of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. There is no reference to the Buddha's specific philosophical formulations — dependent origination, the three marks of existence, the doctrine of no-self. The sangha appears in the separate edicts addressed specifically to Buddhist monastic communities, but in the public edicts it appears only as one religious community among several that the king respects and supports, not as an institution with any special authority over lay life. The Greek translation at Kandahar found no Buddhist technical vocabulary to translate, not because the translators were incompetent but because Ashoka had provided none. The Aramaic translation found the closest equivalent in its own tradition's ethical vocabulary. Both translations are faithful to the source, which is the point.

This systematic absence is not explainable as ignorance. The separate edicts addressed to the Buddhist sangha — particularly the Schism Edict preserved at Sarnath, Kausambi, and Sanchi — use Buddhist institutional terminology with confidence. Ashoka refers to himself in those edicts as a lay disciple of the Buddha for more than two and a half years, and describes visiting the sangha and becoming energetic in his efforts. The pilgrimage edict from Rummindei (the traditional birthplace of the Buddha in modern Nepal) records his visit to Lumbini and his reduction of the village's land tax in honor of the sacred site. A man this engaged with Buddhist practice and institutional life knew the doctrinal vocabulary. He chose not to use it in the public edicts. That choice is the study's analytical starting point.

What the public edicts contain is a moral framework carefully constructed for maximum inclusivity. Dhamma's constituent virtues in the edicts are: ahimsa (non-harm to living beings), tolerance of all religious sects and their practitioners, obedience to parents and teachers, generosity to the poor and to religious practitioners of all traditions, truthfulness, liberality toward friends and acquaintances, and right conduct in all relationships. Romila Thapar identified the key feature of this list with characteristic precision: these are principles to which no religious or social group in Ashoka's empire could reasonably object. A Brahmin could hear them as consistent with Brahminical dharmic ethics. A Buddhist could hear them as a lay interpretation of the Buddha's teaching. A Jain could hear them as aligned with the Jain emphasis on non-violence. A Greek settler could hear them as Hellenistic eusebeia. The Aramaic-speaking northwest could hear them as qsyt. Dhamma was designed to be recognizable from within any tradition present in the empire, which required that it encode no tradition's specific theological content.

The architectural achievement of this construction is more precise than it might initially appear. Dhamma did not merely avoid Buddhist specificity — it avoided any specificity that would have required the Brahmin community to recognize itself as theologically subordinate to a Buddhist interpretive framework. The Brahmin tradition's foundational claim was the hereditary authority of Brahmin priests to perform the rituals through which cosmic and social order were

maintained. Buddhism's foundational challenge to that claim was the argument that ritual performance was less spiritually significant than ethical conduct, and that the ethical authority of the shramana traditions — whose practitioners had renounced caste distinction along with worldly life — was as valid as or more valid than hereditary priestly authority. Had Ashoka's public edicts made that argument, he would have been inviting the Brahmin community to interpret the entire dhamma program as a state-sponsored assault on the institutional basis of their authority and economic position. Instead, dhamma bracketed the theological question entirely by constructing a moral framework that could coexist with Brahminical practice without subordinating it. The price was ideological vagueness. The benefit was the suppression of an elite confrontation the Mauryan state could not afford.

The Brahmin Problem: Reading the Anxiety in the Edicts

The edicts' treatment of Brahmins is most legible when read not as straightforward expression of policy but as political communication addressed to a specific audience whose concern about the dhamma program was real and required continuous management. Multiple edicts enumerate the communities deserving respect with a formulation that consistently places Brahmins first: 'Brahmins and Shramanas.' The ordering is not theologically neutral. In a context where the shramana movements had spent two centuries challenging Brahminical religious authority, placing Brahmins first in the enumeration was a rhetorical gesture of deference to their traditional social primacy. It is the kind of gesture you make when you are worried about the reaction of the person being gestured to.

The animal sacrifice prohibition in Edict I is the most economically significant dhamma measure from the Brahmin community's perspective, and its rhetorical handling in the edict is correspondingly careful. The text does not announce that animal sacrifice is wrong or that the king is prohibiting it for his subjects. It records that in the royal kitchen, hundreds of thousands of animals were formerly killed daily for the preparation of curries, that now only three creatures are killed — two peacocks and a deer, and the deer not always — and that in time even these will not be killed. The register is personal and incremental: the king has changed his own practice. He has not issued a religious ruling. The practical effect over time — the withdrawal of royal patronage from sacrificial ritual, the modeling of a lifestyle that avoided animal killing — was the same whether framed as royal personal practice or as religious legislation. But the framing as personal practice rather than legislation was essential to managing the Brahmin community's response. A royal prohibition of animal sacrifice would have been a direct attack on the economic and ritual infrastructure of the priestly class. A royal announcement that the king himself has reduced animal killing in his kitchen is, formally, merely biographical.

Edict IX's treatment of ceremonies and auspicious rites reads similarly. Ashoka states that many ceremonies practiced by women in particular — ceremonies associated with illness, with weddings, with births, with journeys — are 'of doubtful value.' He says that dhamma ceremonies produce more result. But he does not prohibit the traditional ceremonies. He expresses skepticism about their efficacy while leaving the communities that perform them free to continue. The edicts express this kind of studied ambiguity repeatedly in contexts where the straightforward dhamma implication would have required subordinating Brahminical practice to Buddhist ethical standards. Ashoka's edicts say less than dhamma's internal logic would require, consistently, wherever the cost of saying it fully would have landed on the Brahmin community.

This rhetorical pattern is itself evidence. Documents do not hedge where hedging is unnecessary. The edicts' repeated, careful reassurances of Brahmin respect, their conspicuous

avoidance of the direct implications of dhamma for Brahminical ritual authority, and their consistently soft framing of measures that had real material effects on the Brahmin priestly economy reveal a governance calculation being actively managed: the dhamma program could not proceed at full speed against the most institutionally embedded community in the empire. The Brahmins were too numerous, too socially integrated, and too practically indispensable — as educators, as ritual specialists, as the administrators of local social life in settled agricultural communities — to confront directly. Dhamma was being negotiated around them.

The Dhamma Mahamatras: When Bureaucracy Wears an Ethical Uniform

The most institutionally significant of the dhamma program's innovations appears in Edict V: thirteen years after his coronation, Ashoka reports, he appointed dhamma mahamatras — officials devoted to dhamma — who had not previously existed. He describes their charge in terms that combine welfare administration, information gathering, and religious adjudication: they are to work among all sects, they are to attend to 'women in the royal household,' they are to concern themselves with the affairs of the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharas and other frontier peoples, with the 'aged,' with the 'fettered,' with those 'overwhelmed by calamity.' They are to ensure that the proper spirit of dhamma is being observed, to investigate cases of wrongful punishment or imprisonment, and to look after the emperor's interests 'everywhere.'

The dhamma mahamatras are the dhamma system's institutional expression, and reading their assigned functions carefully dissolves the boundary between welfare administration and state surveillance. Officials who report on whether dhamma is being properly observed across all religious communities, who concern themselves with the emperor's interests 'everywhere,' who have the authority to review judicial decisions for their consistency with dhamma principles — these are not simply charitable officers dispensing royal goodwill. They are a parallel administrative layer whose functional overlap with the surveillance apparatus that the Arthashastra tradition describes is considerable. The Arthashastra discusses in some detail the posting of agents within religious communities to monitor for political sedition, the cultivation of relationships with wandering ascetics whose travel between communities makes them useful information conduits, and the use of royal oversight officials to check on the conduct of provincial administrators. The dhamma mahamatras are not the Arthashastra's covert agents — they are publicly appointed, officially designated, and explicitly described in stone inscriptions across the empire. But their functional territory overlaps significantly with the monitoring and oversight roles the Arthashastra tradition assigns to more covertly operating apparatus.

The critical structural observation about the dhamma mahamatras is their institutional dependency. They are the emperor's officers, appointed by the emperor, reporting through the imperial hierarchy, drawing their authority entirely from the emperor's personal will and the administrative apparatus he controls. They have no independent resource base — no temple endowments, no patronage networks, no property holdings that would survive the political structure that created them. They are, in institutional terms, the imperial executive wearing an ethical uniform. When the imperial executive changed hands to Pushyamitra Shunga and the dhamma framework was abandoned, the dhamma mahamatras had no institutional basis from which to resist. They were state employees whose position depended on a state that was no longer interested in their function. They were, in a precise sense, the opposite of what would have been needed to sustain dhamma beyond Ashoka's personal reign: not an independent interpretive class with its own authority and its own resources, but an extension of the emperor's administrative will. The distinction between these two things — independent interpretive class versus administrative extension — is the distinction between belief infrastructure that can survive a political transition and belief infrastructure that cannot.

The Kalinga Edict's Honest Acknowledgment: Force at the Edges

The thirteenth major rock edict — the Kalinga Edict, the longest and rhetorically most elaborate of the major inscriptions — contains, embedded within its moral renovation narrative, a passage whose candor about the limits of dhamma governance is remarkable. After describing his remorse at Kalinga's destruction and his commitment to dhamma conquest as superior to military conquest, Ashoka addresses 'the forest peoples in his empire.' He tells them that he desires their welfare and their happiness, that he wishes them to follow dhamma — and then he states that he has 'power to punish them if they do not desist' from wrong behavior, and that he hopes they will 'not be killed' for their crimes, understanding that the king desires their welfare while also possessing the authority to compel it.

This passage is the dhamma system's honest acknowledgment of its own boundary. The forest peoples — the tribal and semi-tribal communities living outside the settled agricultural zones where the edict system, the dhamma mahamatras, the Buddhist monastic network, and the Brahminical social fabric all had operational presence — could not be reached through the mechanisms of belief management that worked in urban and semi-urban contexts. The inscription system assumed literacy, or at least access to officials who could read the inscriptions aloud; the dhamma mahamatras assumed communities with enough institutional structure for state welfare officers to engage with; the Buddhist sangha assumed settled communities near which monasteries could be established. Forest peoples who lived outside these networks were, as a practical matter, outside the dhamma system's functional reach. What reached them was the threat of force — the same instrument that the Arthashastra tradition had identified as the state's foundational governing mechanism.

The edict's acknowledgment of this is analytically significant not just because it reveals the system's limit but because it reveals the system's self-awareness about that limit. Ashoka knew that dhamma was not universal. He knew that some populations were governed by force rather than by moral persuasion. He inscribed this knowledge in stone, framed as the tension between his desire for their welfare and his capacity for compulsion — an honest articulation of the constraint-capture spectrum's foundational reality. Every belief-based governance system contains this tension at its edges, where belief cannot reach and force must follow. Ashoka's edicts are unusual in the degree to which they acknowledge it explicitly.

The Schism Edict: When Tolerance Becomes Management

The public edicts promote tolerance of all religious sects with a consistency that has made Ashoka the patron saint of every modern political philosophy that finds ancient authority for pluralism useful. The Schism Edict — preserved in versions at Sarnath, Kausambi, and Sanchi, addressed specifically to the Buddhist monastic community — reveals a different register. Ashoka states that he has united the sangha, that the sangha of monks and nuns has been made whole. He orders that any monk or nun who disrupts the sangha must be required to put on white robes instead of the saffron robes of the religious, and to live outside the monastery in 'non-residence.' He instructs that a copy of this edict must be given to both the lay community and to the monks and nuns, and that local officers (including the provincial governors, the Rajukas, and the city administrators) must be informed so that they know his wishes regarding sangha unity.

The tone is a considerable distance from the public edicts' elaborate tolerance. The Schism Edict is a state intervention in the internal governance of a religious institution — and not a gentle one. The threatened penalty (expulsion from the monastery, exchange of the religious

robes for lay dress) is the Buddhist monastic equivalent of defrocking. The instruction to involve secular officials in enforcing the order makes the state coercive apparatus available as the mechanism through which sangha unity is maintained. This is the relationship between imperial patronage and institutional discipline that every patron-client relationship contains: the patron who provides resources determines, to some extent, how those resources may be used, and the patron who is also the state possesses the coercive means to enforce that determination.

The Schism Edict's existence tells us several things simultaneously. It tells us that the Buddhist sangha was not, at the time of its composition, unified — there were sufficient internal divisions to require state intervention on the question of unity. It tells us that Ashoka understood his relationship to the sangha as including the authority to intervene in its internal governance. And it tells us that the toleration of all sects that the public edicts proclaim did not extend to unlimited tolerance of internal fragmentation within the institution the state had chosen as its primary religious interlocutor. The sangha was being managed, not merely supported. The managed institution was the instrument through which dhamma's Buddhist-inflected content was transmitted to the communities where Buddhist monks lived and taught. An internally fragmented sangha was a less effective instrument. The Schism Edict is the state's attempt to make the instrument more effective by compelling the unity that voluntary consensus had not achieved.

The Edict System as Information Architecture

The geographic distribution of the inscriptions across Ashoka's empire was not random, and its logic reveals the information architecture that the dhamma system was constructing. The major rock edicts appear along the empire's frontier zones and major communication corridors — positioned at points where travelers, merchants, pilgrims, and military movements would encounter them. The pillar edicts, concentrated more heavily in the Gangetic heartland, were erected at locations associated with Buddhist pilgrimage — Sarnath, Kausambi, Rummindei — and at major urban centers. The bilingual edicts in the northwest were specifically located where Greek and Aramaic-speaking populations would be the primary audience. Each inscription was placed where the intended audience was most accessible.

Stone as the chosen medium was itself a governance decision of the first importance. Ashoka says in at least one edict that he had the inscriptions carved in stone 'so that it might endure long and that my descendants might act in conformity with it.' Palm-leaf manuscripts decayed. Oral traditions drifted. Stone inscriptions, properly cut, outlasted dynasties — as this one has, surviving the Mauryan Empire, the subsequent Brahminical restoration, the arrival of Islam, the Mughal period, and British colonialism, to be deciphered and read for the first time in 1837 CE, more than two thousand years after their composition. Ashoka chose the most durable information technology available in the third century BCE for the communication of a message he intended to outlast himself. The choice reveals an awareness that the message might need to do political work after the messenger was gone — an awareness that proved tragically accurate, since the message survived everything except the institutional infrastructure needed to make it operationally relevant.

The dhamma mahamatras functioned as the oral and local dimension of an information system whose surviving record is entirely written. They traveled to the populations the inscriptions addressed and communicated the emperor's dhamma message in the vernacular forms accessible to communities that might not be literate in the Brahmi script of the rock edicts. The combined system — stone inscriptions at key population points, traveling officials carrying the message to communities the inscriptions could not individually reach — was the most

sophisticated mass communication apparatus that any ruler of the ancient Indian subcontinent had yet attempted. It was also, structurally, entirely dependent on the imperial executive. The stone inscriptions survived. The dhamma mahamatras did not.

Continues in Part Two: The System in Operation — Legal Framework, Wealth Extraction, and the Information Architecture of Managed Belief, c. 258–232 BCE

THE DHAMMA PARADOX

Imperial Belief Management and Its Consequences in Ashoka's Mauryan Empire, c. 268–185 BCE

PART TWO

The System in Operation: Legal Framework, Wealth Extraction, and the Management of Meaning, c. 258–232 BCE

In the twenty-seventh year of his reign, Ashoka had new edicts carved on the great stone pillars that had already been standing for a decade in the Gangetic heartland. By this point he had been king for nearly three decades, had completed the military program that gave the Mauryan Empire its fullest territorial extent, had constructed a welfare infrastructure visible across thousands of miles of road and river, and had been inscribing his moral commitments on rock faces at the empire's frontiers since at least the fifteenth year of his rule. The later pillar edicts have a different tone from the earlier rock edicts — somewhat more reflective, somewhat more aware of the gap between intention and outcome — and one of them, Pillar Edict VII, reads almost like a balance sheet: Ashoka enumerates the dhamma measures he has undertaken and acknowledges that they have not produced the results he had hoped for in terms of the population's actual moral improvement. The officers he has appointed to dhamma work have achieved 'many things,' he says, but he is aware that 'the welfare and happiness of the people in this world and the next' remains an ongoing project rather than an accomplished fact.

This self-assessment, carved in stone in the twenty-seventh year of a reign that would last at most thirty-six years, is the dhamma system's mid-course audit. What it reveals is a program that has been running for at least a decade, that has generated enormous visible activity — the infrastructure, the officers, the edicts themselves — and that its author recognizes as insufficient to its stated purpose. The gap between the program's institutional ambition and its actual reach into the lives of fifty million subjects was never closed, and Ashoka knew it. Part Two of this study examines how the system actually operated across its three main functional dimensions: the legal framework of toleration and inter-religious management, the economic structures of extraction and the welfare reframing that dhamma provided, and the information architecture through which the state managed what subjects could know and how they were expected to interpret their experience of imperial governance.

Section III: Legal Framework — Toleration as Imperial Administration

The Mechanics of Religious Pluralism

The toleration edict — the twelfth major rock edict — is the document most often cited in discussions of Ashoka's enlightened governance, and it deserves the careful dual reading that the framework requires: reading what it says about religious tolerance alongside reading what it does as a governance instrument. The edict states that the Beloved of the Gods honors members of all sects, whether ascetics or householders; that he honors them with gifts and with recognition; but that the Beloved of the Gods does not value gifts and recognition as much as the growth of the essential doctrine — the sāravṛddhi — of all sects. That essential doctrine is described as 'restraint of speech': one should not praise one's own sect and disparage others, for disparagement of other sects is harmful, and concord is to be commended, so that members of all sects may hear one another's teachings and be pleased to hear them.

The governance logic of this formulation is more precise than its philosophical generosity suggests. An empire whose religious communities were actively competing for patronage, social prestige, and the loyalty of urban merchant communities — and whose Brahmin-Buddhist-Jain-Ajivika landscape constituted exactly such a competition — had an immediate material interest in preventing that competition from producing the kind of inter-sectarian violence that the Arthashastra tradition classified as a primary source of internal instability. The toleration edict is not a philosophical statement about the equal validity of all

religious paths; it is a civil peace regulation dressed in philosophical language. It does not require that anyone believe any sect other than their own is spiritually adequate. It requires that they not attack the others publicly. The distinction is between theological pluralism, which the edict does not mandate, and civil behavior in the presence of religious difference, which it does. The practical demand is minimal: keep the peace. The philosophical framing elevates the demand into a moral obligation, which is more durable than a civil regulation because it asks people to internalize the constraint rather than merely comply with it under threat of sanction.

The specific formulation about 'hearing one another's teachings' is worth pausing over. If religious communities are hearing one another's teachings, the state has a passive intelligence function operating at no additional cost: the communities themselves are generating information about what the others believe and practice, information that flows through the social networks in which the dhamma mahamatras were embedded. This is not to suggest that the edict was drafted primarily with surveillance in mind — the evidence does not support that degree of cynicism about its motivation. But it is to observe that the governance effects of religious communities in open communication with one another are systematically different from the governance effects of communities in sectarian isolation, and the differences favor the state's monitoring capacity as much as they favor philosophical cross-fertilization.

The Animal Sacrifice Prohibition: Extraction in Reverse

The first major rock edict's announcement of reduced animal slaughter in the royal kitchen functions, as discussed in Part One, as a carefully framed personal reform rather than a religious ruling. But the economic consequences of that framing, operating through the logic of royal example and the mechanism of dhamma mahamatra oversight, were neither personal nor trivial. The Brahminical ritual economy depended in significant part on royal patronage for its largest and most prestigious ceremonies. Vedic sacrificial rites ranged from household level observances that required minimal priestly involvement to enormous royal yajna ceremonies — the ashvamedha (horse sacrifice), the rajasuya (royal consecration), the vajapeya (a rite of royal strength) — that required teams of specialized Brahmin priests, could last for days, and involved the sacrifice of large numbers of animals. The fees for these major ceremonies were substantial: land grants, cattle, gold, grain. A royal court that participated enthusiastically in major yajna ceremonies channeled significant resources into the Brahmin priestly economy through a mechanism that the priests controlled and administered.

Ashoka's withdrawal from this patronage system — announced as personal practice but modeled as the behavior of a dhamma king — redirected those resources toward Buddhist and Jain institutions and toward the state's own welfare infrastructure. The pillar construction program, the stupa endowments, the hospital and road networks: all of these required labor, materials, and administrative management that the royal treasury funded from resources that were no longer flowing into yajna ceremonies. This is not a zero-sum calculation — Ashoka did not take money from Brahmin priests and give it to Buddhist monks in a direct transaction. The mechanisms were indirect, operating through the shift in royal patronage patterns and through the social modeling effect that royal behavior had on aristocratic households and urban merchants who looked to royal example for guidance on appropriate religious expenditure. But the directionality of the economic flow was real, and the Brahmin community that depended on royal patronage for its most economically significant ritual services felt the shift in the pattern of that patronage in materially concrete terms.

The edict's framing as personal reform rather than religious legislation was therefore also, from the Brahmin perspective, somewhat disingenuous — not because the personal framing was

false but because the distinction between 'the king has personally reduced animal killing' and 'the king has effectively withdrawn royal patronage from the ritual economy that sustains Brahmin institutional authority' was a distinction of presentation rather than of material consequence. Brahmin priests understood this. The edicts' anxious reassurances of Brahmin respect were addressed to an audience that was already calculating what the dhamma program's economic implications meant for their institutional position, regardless of how those implications were framed in the official text.

The Rajukas and the Legal Hierarchy: Dhamma in the Administrative Structure

Pillar Edict IV introduces a category of official — the Rajukas — who receive extended treatment as part of Ashoka's description of how dhamma is to be administered through the existing governmental hierarchy. The Rajukas were senior provincial administrators responsible for the welfare of hundreds of thousands of people; Ashoka describes conferring on them independent judicial authority, the power to punish and to release, so that they can administer their functions with confidence and without constant reference to the imperial center. This delegation of judicial authority is framed as a dhamma measure — the Rajukas are to administer their populations with the same care and confidence that a nurse maintains for her charges, seeking the welfare and happiness of the people in this world and the next.

The legal-administrative significance of this delegation is considerable. By incorporating dhamma language and dhamma objectives into the description of conventional administrative authority, Ashoka was performing a translation: the existing administrative hierarchy was being reframed as the instrument of dhamma governance rather than of merely extractive imperial power. The Rajukas were not new officials; they were the existing provincial administration wearing a new legitimating description. This reframing accomplished something specific: it gave the administrative hierarchy an ideological identity that could be invoked to shape behavior, and it bound that hierarchy's public self-understanding to the dhamma framework in ways that created at least nominal accountability to dhamma standards. An administrator who is publicly described as serving the people's welfare 'in this world and the next' has made a more specific legitimating commitment than one who is simply described as the emperor's revenue officer. The commitment may not always be honored, but its public statement creates a standard against which conduct can be measured and criticized — a small but real constraint on arbitrary administration.

Ashoka was explicit in multiple edicts that he expected his officers to behave consistently whether he was watching or not, that he expected them to act in conformity with dhamma principles at all times, and that they would be held accountable for failures of attention to the people's welfare. Pillar Edict VI contains his most direct statement on this: all business should be reported to him at any time, wherever he happens to be, because he is never content with merely exerting himself but wants to attend to the affairs of the people. The dhamma administrative framework was thus simultaneously a moral vision and a monitoring system: officers who internalized dhamma as their governing principle would behave appropriately because they believed in it; officers who did not internalize it would behave appropriately because they knew the emperor's attention was, at least in principle, always present. Both mechanisms served the same administrative function.

Criminal Justice and the Limits of Dhamma Compassion

The edicts' treatment of criminal justice is one of the places where the gap between dhamma's moral language and the Mauryan state's actual governing practices is most visible, and reading the gap carefully is essential to avoiding the hagiographic reading that takes the moral language at face value. Rock Edict IV states that dhamma's progress has increased abstention from killing living beings, non-violence to living beings, proper behavior toward relatives, Brahmins, and ascetics, and obedience to mother and father — framing the edict system's moral influence in terms of voluntary behavioral change. But Pillar Edict IV, carved later in the reign when Ashoka was apparently reviewing his program's results, is more direct about the coercive dimension: it discusses punishment, it mentions that there are people who are in prison or who have been sentenced, and it describes the three-day stay of execution that Ashoka has granted to prisoners on death row so that relatives can intercede and so that the condemned can 'give gifts or undertake a fast' for merit in the next world.

The three-day stay of execution is, in the context of the dhamma program, a characteristic gesture: it acknowledges the existence of a death penalty, provides a small act of mercy within it, and frames that mercy in dhamma language while leaving the underlying punitive structure unchanged. Ashoka did not abolish capital punishment. He did not abolish torture, though he apparently attempted to regularize its application. The Arthashastra tradition's elaborate penal code — with its detailed prescriptions for different forms of mutilation, execution, and imprisonment for different categories of offense — continued to operate under Ashoka's administration. What dhamma added was a layer of compassionate framing around the administration of a punitive system that remained substantially as his predecessors had constructed it. The system punished. The king was sorry about the necessity of punishment. Both things were simultaneously true and institutionally compatible.

This is not hypocrisy in any simple sense — the framing was real in the sense that it shaped how officials understood their roles and how the population was invited to understand the state's coercive functions. A state that publicly acknowledges remorse about the necessity of punishment, that provides stays of execution as acts of royal mercy, that frames its administrative hierarchy as servants of the people's welfare rather than extractors of revenue, has genuinely different relationships with its subjects than a state that makes no such acknowledgments. The relationships are not as different as the framing implies — the punishment still happens, the revenue still flows — but the difference is not zero. Dhamma's legal contribution was primarily to the register in which power was described rather than to the distribution of power itself.

Section IV: Wealth Extraction — What the Empire Took and How Dhamma Reframed It

The Mauryan Extraction Machine

The Mauryan Empire's fiscal system, as the Arthashastra tradition describes it and as the edicts partially corroborate, was a multi-channel extraction apparatus of considerable sophistication. Land tax was the foundational mechanism: the Arthashastra tradition indicates a standard rate of one-sixth of agricultural produce, though actual rates varied by land quality, crop type, and the terms under which specific communities had been brought into the empire. Merchants paid customs duties on goods moving through urban markets and along the road network; the Arthashastra describes elaborate systems of market regulation with officials assessing duties on commercial transactions, checking weights and measures for fraud, and collecting tolls at river

crossings and city gates. State monopolies on salt, mines, forests, and certain artisanal industries provided revenue streams independent of agricultural and commercial taxation. Compulsory labor for state construction projects — the road building, the well digging, the pillar erection that the edicts celebrate as welfare measures — represented extraction of a different kind: the labor of subjects converted directly into imperial infrastructure without monetary compensation.

None of this changed when dhamma became imperial policy. The edicts contain no instruction to reduce the land tax, no promise of fiscal relief, no transfer of accumulated wealth from the imperial treasury to the agricultural poor who bore the primary burden of the extraction system. The sixth-of-produce land tax that had funded Chandragupta's military machine continued to fund Ashoka's welfare infrastructure, his stupa construction program, his dhamma mahamatra apparatus, and the military establishment that he maintained even while renouncing further conquest. The extraction continued. What changed was the framework within which it was understood and the purposes toward which a portion of the extracted surplus was visibly directed.

Quantifying Mauryan extraction with any precision is not possible from the available sources. The Arthashastra tradition provides a detailed tax and revenue framework, but its relationship to actual Mauryan practice is complicated by the dating uncertainties that Olivelle's scholarship has established. Megasthenes' description of the Mauryan state suggests enormous wealth concentrated at Pataliputra — accounts of the royal palace's splendor, of the army's size, of the administrative apparatus's scale — but does not provide the kind of systematic fiscal data that would allow calculation of aggregate extraction rates. What can be said is structural: the Mauryan Empire maintained a professional army whose size ancient sources estimate at hundreds of thousands of soldiers, a bureaucratic apparatus of considerable complexity, a capital city of major scale, and now under Ashoka a welfare infrastructure distributed across the subcontinent. All of this required continuous revenue at levels that no ancient state could have sustained without systematic extraction from agricultural and commercial populations.

The Welfare Infrastructure: Visible Legitimation at Calculable Cost

Against this extraction backdrop, the welfare measures that the dhamma edicts enumerate and that the archaeological record partially confirms take on their precise analytical function. Edict II describes what Ashoka has provided for the welfare of humans and animals throughout his dominion and in neighboring kingdoms: medical treatment for both, road plantings of shade trees and mango groves, the digging of wells at half-mile intervals along roads, the construction of rest houses. Edict III announces that provincial officers are to conduct tours of their districts every five years to promulgate dhamma and to transact other business, including specifically the inspection of welfare infrastructure. The pillar edicts from Rummindei and Nigalisagar record that Ashoka visited Buddhist sacred sites, made donations, and reduced the land tax of the Lumbini village to one-eighth of produce — the only specific instance in the edicts of a tax reduction associated with dhamma activity, and notably limited to a single sacred site of exceptional religious significance rather than applied broadly.

The welfare infrastructure was real. Archaeological evidence confirms road construction, well digging, and the establishment of institutional facilities consistent with the descriptions in the edicts. The measures were not purely rhetorical. But their material significance relative to the total extraction burden on the Mauryan population was modest. The construction of shade trees and rest houses along roads benefited travelers, primarily merchants and administrators — people whose movement through the road network made them the most likely audience for the

edict system's message and whose goodwill was commercially and politically valuable. Wells at half-mile intervals along highways served a real need in the Indian agricultural landscape. Medical facilities for humans and animals — if the description in Edict II is taken literally rather than as aspirational language — would have been a genuine novelty in the ancient world, though their geographic extent and operational continuity cannot be verified from the edicts themselves.

The analytical point is not that the welfare infrastructure was window dressing — it was a real investment with real benefits — but that its function was as much legitimating as material. A traveler who drank from a state-dug well, rested under a state-planted shade tree, and slept in a state-built rest house was experiencing a continuous series of small reminders that the imperial state provided for his welfare, that the Beloved of the Gods had considered his needs and made provision for them. The subjective experience of the road journey was transformed from an encounter with a revenue-extracting apparatus into a repeated experience of the ruler's beneficence. This transformation was worth more to the state than the sum of the individual infrastructure investments, because it operated on the population's interpretive framework rather than merely on its material conditions. The road was the same road whether or not it had rest houses. The traveler's relationship to the state that built it was fundamentally different depending on whether that state had provided for his comfort along it.

This is the extraction-legitimation dynamic that dhamma was designed to produce. The state continued to take a sixth of agricultural produce, to collect market duties, to conscript labor for construction. In exchange, it provided visible welfare infrastructure that could be experienced as evidence of the ruler's compassion. The ratio between what was taken and what was returned as visible benefit was probably similar to or worse than what extractive states without elaborate welfare programs provided — the overhead of the dhamma apparatus (the dhamma mahamatras, the pillar construction program, the stupa endowments) added to rather than replaced conventional administrative costs. What changed was the interpretive framework that made the ratio acceptable: subjects who understood themselves as living under a dhamma king's compassionate governance experienced the extraction differently than subjects who understood themselves as living under a revenue-maximizing Arthashastra state. The material reality was similar. The meaning was different. And meaning, in the governance of large populations whose compliance is ultimately more important than their coerced obedience, has real material value.

The Sangha as Stakeholder: Patronage, Dependency, and Structural Vulnerability

The Buddhist monastic community — the sangha — received from Ashoka's patronage resources that transformed its institutional scale and geographic reach. The construction of thousands of stupas across the subcontinent and beyond, the endowment of monasteries, the provision of land grants for institutional support, and the royal sponsorship of Buddhist pilgrimage and council activity gave the sangha economic resources that its pre-Ashokan form had not possessed on anything like this scale. The Arthashastra tradition notes that endowed religious institutions — those with land grants and regular income — develop interests in political stability that make them reliable supporters of whatever political arrangement sustains their endowments. The Mauryan sangha, showered with Ashokan patronage, had exactly this interest. A sangha whose monasteries had been built by the emperor, whose land grants came from the imperial treasury, and whose institutional expansion across the subcontinent depended on continued royal support had structural reasons to support the political arrangement that

provided those resources, independent of any theological calculation about the rightness of Ashoka's rule.

This stakeholder logic is recognizable across the cases in this series. The English gentry who acquired monastic land under Henry VIII had material reasons to resist Catholic restoration that were entirely independent of their personal theological convictions. The dehqan families of Khorasan who entered the Abbasid administrative machinery had material reasons to maintain their accommodation with the Islamic order that went beyond their individual conversion's sincerity. Ashoka's sangha had material reasons to support the Mauryan dhamma arrangement that went beyond whatever its members individually believed about Buddhist doctrine or Ashokan piety.

The critical structural difference is what made the Mauryan sangha's stakeholder position fatally fragile compared to its later analogues. The English gentry's monastic lands became freehold property that could be passed to heirs, sold, mortgaged, and defended through the common law courts — an institutional transformation of ecclesiastical resource into secular property that could survive any political change short of outright confiscation. The dehqan families' accommodation with Islamic administration was embedded in local communities, kinship networks, and administrative practices that persisted regardless of which dynasty controlled the caliphate. The Mauryan sangha's endowments came from the emperor and were administered as imperial patronage rather than as independent institutional property. When the dynasty changed, the endowment mechanism changed with it. The sangha could not defend its resources through legal institutions that existed independently of imperial will, because no such institutions existed in the third century BCE Indian legal landscape. What the emperor gave, the emperor's successor could withdraw. The stakeholder class was real. Its material investment in the political arrangement's survival was real. But it lacked the institutional infrastructure to convert that investment into organized political resistance when the military changed sides.

The Buddhist Economy: Monks, Merchants, and the Flow of Material

Understanding the economic relationship between the Buddhist sangha and the broader Mauryan commercial economy illuminates both the dhamma program's sources of support and the limits of that support's political utility. The pre-Ashokan Buddhist sangha had developed in significant measure through urban merchant patronage — the trading communities of the Gangetic plain had found in Buddhist ethical teaching a framework compatible with commercial life in ways that the Brahminical tradition's varna hierarchy and sacrificial obligations were not, and they had supported Buddhist monasteries as patrons whose gifts generated merit while also providing institutional support for a tradition that legitimated their social role. The sangha's relationship to merchant communities was therefore mutually beneficial in material terms: merchants provided donations that sustained the monasteries, and monasteries provided spiritual services (teaching, ritual, the merit-accumulating function of supporting monks) that the merchant community valued.

Ashoka's patronage amplified this relationship at a scale that transformed it. Royal construction of monasteries and stupas along trade routes created a network of Buddhist institutional infrastructure that coincided with the road network along which merchants traveled — making Buddhist religious services continuously available to commercial travelers in a way that no previous period of Buddhist history had enabled. The rest houses and wells that the dhamma welfare program provided along the same roads served the same traveling community. A merchant moving between Pataliputra and Taxila in Ashoka's reign was moving along a road network that provided both material welfare infrastructure and Buddhist spiritual infrastructure at

regular intervals, all associated with the patronage of a dhamma king who also provided the political stability and commercial regulation on which his business depended. The merchant community's material interests in the continuation of the Ashokan arrangement were substantial, which is why the Buddhist institutional tradition's memory of Ashoka was preserved with such warmth in the mercantile communities of the Buddhist diaspora — Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Southeast Asia — where Buddhist-merchant networks continued to function for centuries after the Mauryan Empire's collapse.

The political utility of merchant community support, however, was limited in a specific and important way. Merchants could provide donations, could advocate for policies they favored, and could organize their commercial networks in ways that supported Buddhist institutional activity. What they could not provide was military force. In the Arthashastra tradition's analysis of political power, the merchant community appears as a significant economic resource but not as a source of organized violence. When Pushyamitra Shunga moved against the last Mauryan emperor with the professional army's support, the fact that the Buddhist merchant community in Pataliputra might have preferred a different outcome was politically irrelevant. The military had no mechanism for being outvoted.

Section V: Information Control — The Architecture of Managed Meaning

Stone, Geography, and the Audience Calculation

The decision to inscribe the dhamma program's message in stone and distribute those inscriptions across the empire's full geographic extent was a communications strategy of considerable sophistication for the third century BCE, and understanding its logic requires thinking about what Ashoka was actually trying to accomplish with the edict system. He was not attempting to create a literate audience for a written message — literacy rates in Mauryan India were low enough that only a small fraction of the population could read the Brahmi script in which most of the edicts were composed. He was creating a visible, physical, durable presence of imperial moral authority at key points across the imperial landscape: landmarks whose existence demonstrated the emperor's attention and whose content, read aloud to assembled audiences by literate officials, could be transmitted to the overwhelmingly oral-tradition populations who gathered to hear them.

The geographic distribution of the inscriptions maps onto the empire's infrastructure of movement and congregation rather than onto its population distribution. Major rock edicts cluster at the empire's frontier zones — Afghanistan, the far south, the northwest — where the imperial message was most needed by populations most recently and least thoroughly integrated into Mauryan authority. Pillar edicts concentrate in the Gangetic heartland and at Buddhist pilgrimage sites, where the message's primary audience was already within the empire's institutional orbit and where Buddhist pilgrimage traffic guaranteed a concentrated, religiously motivated audience. The bilingual edicts at Kandahar were precisely located for the Greek and Aramaic-speaking communities of the northwest. This is not universal broadcast — it is targeted communication, with the message calibrated for specific audiences at points where those audiences were most accessible.

The choice of prominent natural rock faces and artificially erected stone pillars as the inscription medium added a dimension of physical scale that parchment or clay tablets could not provide. A

major rock edict inscribed on a cliff face twenty feet high, polished smooth and carved with several hundred words of Brahmi text, was a demonstration of state power as much as a communication of moral content: only a state with the administrative capacity to locate suitable rock faces across thousands of miles of territory, transport specialized stone carvers to those locations, and maintain the organizational continuity to execute the same program across decades of a long reign could have produced this inscription network. The message and the medium were inseparable: the message said the emperor cares about your welfare; the medium demonstrated that the emperor commands the resources and organizational capacity to express that care across an empire of continent-like scale.

The Dhamma Mahamatras as Field Information Officers

Part One described the dhamma mahamatras as the dhamma system's institutional expression — the parallel administrative layer that combined welfare monitoring, inter-religious adjudication, and information collection. Their information function deserves more specific treatment here, because the Arthashastra tradition's discussion of state intelligence collection provides the context in which the dhamma mahamatras' assigned functions can be most clearly read.

The Arthashastra describes an elaborate apparatus of intelligence agents — agents planted within religious communities to monitor for sedition, traveling ascetics cultivated as information sources, agents in marketplaces, agents in the households of the king's enemies. Whether this apparatus existed in Mauryan India in the precise form the Arthashastra describes is uncertain; the dating issue means we cannot assume a one-to-one correspondence between the text's prescriptions and third-century BCE practice. But the functional logic of state intelligence collection — the need for information about what populations are thinking, what grievances are forming, where political discontent might be organizing — is independent of any specific text, and a state of the Mauryan Empire's scale and complexity had acute need for this information regardless of the formal mechanisms through which it was collected.

The dhamma mahamatras, as described in Edict V, worked among all religious sects, attended to the affairs of the royal household's women's quarters, concerned themselves with frontier peoples and Greek communities, investigated cases of wrongful imprisonment. The functions that cannot be accomplished without detailed local knowledge of community dynamics, relationship networks, and behavioral patterns — functions that serve the state's information needs as much as its welfare objectives. An official who investigates wrongful imprisonment must understand who has been imprisoned, by whom, on what grounds, and whether those grounds are legitimate: this requires information about the local administrative and judicial apparatus that is indistinguishable in its collection methods from intelligence gathering. An official who works among 'all sects' to ensure their members are pursuing dhamma must understand what those sects are doing and teaching: this requires monitoring that serves administrative oversight regardless of whether it is nominally welfare-oriented.

The dhamma mahamatras were not a covert intelligence apparatus. Their existence was publicly announced in the edicts, their function was publicly described as welfare-oriented, and there is no reason to believe that their members understood themselves primarily as intelligence gatherers rather than as welfare officers. But the functional distinction between welfare monitoring and intelligence collection is narrow in the context of a state that needed both and that had designed a single class of officials to perform functions serving both objectives simultaneously. The overlap was structural, not necessarily intentional, and it represents one of the dhamma program's several instances of welfare framing covering functions that the Arthashastra tradition would have classified as standard administrative practice.

The Systematic Silences: What the Edicts Do Not Record

The most revealing dimension of the dhamma edict system's information management is not what the edicts communicate but what they systematically omit. Across the entire edict corpus — thirty-plus inscriptions distributed across thousands of miles of territory, covering topics from royal diet to international diplomacy to criminal justice — there is no description of the Mauryan tax system, no acknowledgment of the extraction burden that sustained the state, no account of the surveillance apparatus that the Arthashastra tradition describes, no description of the punitive machinery beyond the compassionate hedges around it, and no acknowledgment of the military establishment that continued to exist, continued to be funded, and continued to provide the final guarantee of the political arrangement's stability. The official story of Ashoka's empire, as told by its own inscriptions, is a story of a ruler moved by compassion, constructing infrastructure for his subjects' welfare, promoting moral virtue among populations eager to receive it. The story omits the army, the tax collectors, the spies, the executioners, and the coercive foundation beneath every dhamma gesture.

This omission is the information control strategy's core operation. It is not deception in the simple sense — Ashoka does not claim that no taxes are collected or that no criminals are punished. But it is curation: the official record presents the state's relationship to its subjects through the frame of the ruler's moral concern, systematically excluding the frame of the state's material demands. A population whose interpretive framework for imperial governance is 'the dhamma king provides rest houses and medical care' experiences the same tax collector differently than a population whose framework is 'the Arthashastra state extracts one-sixth of my harvest.' The tax collector is still coming. The sixth is still owed. But the meaning of the encounter — and therefore the compliance cost — is different depending on which frame is operative.

The edicts' attention to what the population might say about the emperor's dhamma program is visible in their repeated concern with the king's reputation rather than merely his actual behavior. Multiple edicts express the hope that the emperor's example will inspire imitation — that seeing the king practice non-violence, his subjects will practice it; that seeing the king support all religious sects, his subjects will adopt tolerance. The concern with reputation — with what the population believes about the king, with how the king's behavior is perceived and transmitted through oral tradition — is a concern with the information environment within which the king's authority operates. A king whose reputation for dhamma is established across fifty million subjects has a lower governance cost than a king whose subjects regard him as indistinguishable from any other Arthashastra ruler. The edicts are, among other things, reputation management at continental scale.

The Buddhist Sources as Institutional Memory: How the Story Was Preserved

The edicts were forgotten within a generation of Ashoka's death. The Brahmi script in which most were written ceased to be read; the Mauryan Empire collapsed; the institutions that might have preserved the memory of Ashoka's program were either destroyed or driven from the Indian subcontinent over the subsequent centuries. The Ashokan legend — the story of the great Buddhist king who transformed his empire through moral conviction — survived not in India but in Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and eventually China, carried by the Buddhist institutional networks that Ashoka's missionaries had established and that developed independently of Indian political authority once that authority was removed.

The preservation of Ashoka's memory through the Buddhist chronicles is itself an exercise in information management, though posthumous and conducted by an institution rather than by the man himself. The Mahavamsa, the Dipavamsa, the Ashokavadana: these texts were written by Buddhist institutions that had material and ideological interests in how Ashoka was remembered. A king whose Buddhist piety was the primary motivation for his policy, whose dhamma was essentially Buddhist teaching generalized for a diverse population, and whose patronage of the sangha represented the high point of Buddhist royal support — this image served the Buddhist institutional narrative of what a proper king should be and do. The alternative image — a ruler who constructed a carefully vague universalist ideology specifically to avoid making Buddhism the state religion, who deployed the sangha instrumentally as a welfare administration vehicle, and whose 'tolerance' was primarily a civil peace regulation — served no Buddhist institutional interest and was accordingly not the image that the Buddhist chronicles transmitted.

Reading against the grain of these chronicles, the suppression shadow they cast becomes visible. The chronicles contain details that the hagiographic framework cannot fully absorb: accounts of Ashoka's pre-dhamma cruelty that establish the transformation narrative's dramatic arc; descriptions of his patronage that are so lavish as to suggest a state-dependent institution rather than a freely developing spiritual community; accounts of the Schism Edict's background that reveal internal sangha politics messy enough to require imperial intervention. These incidental details — preserved because they serve the narrative of transformation or of royal-sangha relationship — reveal, at their edges, the mechanism that the hagiographic frame obscures. The chronicles are not reliable history. They are the products of a belief system describing its own history, which means they are simultaneously evidence of what happened and evidence of how the institution needed what happened to be remembered. Both kinds of evidence are analytically useful.

The Suppression Shadow: What Was Not Preserved in India

The most important information about what the dhamma program meant to those it most directly disadvantaged — the Brahmin communities whose ritual economy it disrupted, the Ajivika communities whose patronage it reduced, the populations subject to dhamma mahamatra oversight whose compliance was not entirely voluntary — does not exist in the surviving record. This absence is the suppression shadow that the framework identifies as the most revealing evidence about information control in any ancient case: the shape of what is missing tells you who controlled the record-making capacity and what they needed omitted.

Brahmin scholarly and priestly communities in the third century BCE had both the literacy and the institutional infrastructure to produce written records of their experience of the dhamma program. That no such records survive — that the Brahmin reaction to the animal sacrifice prohibition, to the promotion of Buddhist and Jain ascetics as equally honored alongside Brahmin priests, to the withdrawal of royal yajna patronage is entirely inferrable only from the edicts' hedging language rather than from any direct Brahmin account — is a function of what happened after the Mauryan Empire ended. The Shunga dynasty that followed was Brahmin-led and Brahmin-patronized; the literary production of the subsequent centuries reflected Brahmin institutional priorities; and the transmission of texts through the gurukula system ensured that what Brahmin scholars preserved was what Brahmin scholars valued. Accounts of how a Buddhist-inflected ruler had disadvantaged Brahmin institutional interests would not have been what Brahmin transmitters prioritized in the difficult period of Mauryan collapse and institutional reconstitution.

The Ajivikas — the third major shramana movement that had received some pre-Ashokan royal patronage — are the most dramatic instance of the suppression shadow's operation. The Ajivika community essentially disappeared from the historical record, leaving almost no surviving texts, no institutional continuity, and no tradition that transmitted its teachings into the periods when scholarly record-keeping improved. Whether Ashoka's relative neglect of the Ajivikas in favor of the Buddhist sangha accelerated their institutional decline, whether their theological commitments (a rigorous determinism that sat uneasily with dhamma's emphasis on moral striving) made them unsuited to the role Ashoka's patronage system rewarded, or whether their disappearance resulted primarily from the post-Ashokan period's upheavals, cannot be determined from the available evidence. What can be determined is that a religious community that had significant presence in Chandragupta's India left almost no trace in subsequent Indian intellectual history — the kind of total institutional disappearance that the framework identifies as the signature of belief system elimination through passive displacement rather than active persecution.

Continues in Part Three: Resistance, Collapse, and the World That the Failure Made — The Brahminical Restoration, the Five Conditions, and the Paradox of Buddhism's Global Survival, c. 232–185 BCE and Beyond

THE DHAMMA PARADOX

Imperial Belief Management and Its Consequences in Ashoka's Mauryan Empire, c. 268–185 BCE

PART THREE

Resistance, Collapse, and the World That the Failure Made, c. 232 BCE–Present

Pushyamitra Shunga held the position of senapati — commander of the army — in the court of the last Mauryan emperor, a figure the tradition names Brihadrata. Around 185 BCE, as the Buddhist chronicle the Divyavadana records it, Pushyamitra arranged a military review. Brihadrata attended, expecting the routine ceremonial demonstration of his army's capacity. Pushyamitra killed him there, in front of the assembled troops, and proclaimed himself king. The Mauryan dynasty, founded by Chandragupta roughly a hundred and thirty-five years earlier, ended at that moment. The dhamma program that Ashoka had inscribed on stone across a subcontinent ended with it — not because anyone dismantled it, not because a counter-ideology replaced it through a long process of institutional competition, but because the man who controlled the army decided the arrangement was over, and there was nothing in the dhamma system's institutional architecture capable of disagreeing.

The coup's mechanism is the study's analytical conclusion in miniature. Dhamma had operated for fifty years after Ashoka's death without the institutional infrastructure that might have given it independent political weight — no autonomous priesthood with its own resource base and legitimating authority, no independent legal institutions whose rulings dhamma officials could invoke against the military hierarchy, no stakeholder class wealthy and organized enough to offer the senapati's soldiers an alternative to following their commander. The welfare infrastructure was stone: mute, durable, and politically inert. The dhamma mahamatras were the emperor's servants, and the emperor was dead. Pushyamitra needed to overcome no institutional resistance because there was none to overcome. The prediction that invention-based systems without independent institutional roots collapse within a generation of the founding military arrangement's change was not merely confirmed by Mauryan history. It was confirmed with a completeness that leaves no interpretive ambiguity.

This final part of the study examines the dynamics of that collapse in detail — the resistance landscape that preceded it, the military substrate that determined it, and the extraordinary long-term consequences that followed from it. The consequences are the study's most counterintuitive finding and its most significant analytical contribution: the belief system that failed completely as imperial governance produced, through its failure, one of the great world religions. Understanding why requires understanding what the dhamma program had prevented Buddhism from becoming during Ashoka's reign and what Buddhism became once it was expelled from the state that had colonized it.

Section VI: Resistance and Suppression — The Five Conditions and the Predicted Collapse

Brahmin Resistance: What the Edicts Were Trying to Manage

No text documenting Brahmin opposition to Ashoka's dhamma program in Brahmin voices survives. The absence is the most important evidence available, and its interpretation requires care. It does not mean that Brahmin opposition did not exist — the edicts' repeated, careful reassurances of Brahmin respect, the conspicuous softening of measures that directly affected Brahmin economic interests, and the studied avoidance of the direct implications of dhamma for Brahminical ritual authority all indicate an opposition sufficiently real and potentially destabilizing to require continuous management. What the absence means is that the Brahmin community's response to the dhamma program was not preserved in written form that survived the subsequent millennium, a function of which communities controlled the record-making apparatus and what those communities needed preserved.

The edicts themselves are the primary evidence for Brahmin resistance, read against the grain. Consider the pattern: Edict I's announcement of reduced animal killing is framed as personal royal practice rather than as religious legislation, specifically avoiding the framing that would have made it a direct assault on yajna ceremony. Edict IX's skepticism about women's household ceremonies is qualified to the point of near-withdrawal. The formulation 'Brahmins and Shramanas' — Brahmins listed first, Shramanas second, in a context where the shramana movements had spent two centuries challenging Brahminical authority — appears with sufficient regularity to constitute a rhetorical policy rather than casual word choice. Pillar Edict VII's late-reign acknowledgment that dhamma progress has been incomplete reads, in context, as a partial admission that the Brahmin community's accommodation with the program was shallower than the program's ambitions had required.

The economic logic of Brahmin resistance was straightforward and did not require theological objection to provide sufficient motivation. The Brahmin priestly class in the Gangetic plain administered the ritual life of agricultural communities at the household level — birth ceremonies, marriage rites, death rituals, seasonal observances, the auspicious-date consultations that governed important decisions. This service economy was self-sustaining at the village level and largely independent of royal patronage for its basic operation. What royal patronage provided was the upper tier: the major yajna ceremonies, the royal court's ritual services, the gurukula endowments that trained the next generation of Brahmin scholars and priests. Ashoka's withdrawal of this upper-tier patronage — redirected toward Buddhist and Jain institutions and toward the state's welfare infrastructure — had real economic consequences for the Brahmin institutional network without destroying it. The village-level Brahmin economy continued functioning through the dhamma period and resumed its previous relationship to royal patronage immediately when a Brahmin-led dynasty replaced the Mauryans. The resilience of the Brahmin economic position was itself a function of its distribution: because Brahmin institutional authority was embedded in every village's social fabric rather than concentrated in court-dependent institutions, it was not vulnerable to the royal patronage shift in the way the Buddhist sangha's court-dependent endowments proved to be.

The contrast between these two institutional structures — the Brahmin distributed network versus the Buddhist court-dependent patronage system — was the structural fact that determined the Shunga restoration's speed and completeness. The Brahmin community did not need to build new institutions after Pushyamitra's coup. The institutions were already there, operating at the village level throughout the dhamma period, waiting only for the court-level patronage to resume flowing in their direction. The Buddhist sangha, whose Ashokan-scale institutional presence had been built through imperial patronage rather than through the slow accumulation of local community support and independent economic foundations, had no comparable resilience. When the patronage stopped, the institutional framework that the patronage had built could not sustain itself from alternative sources at anything like the scale Ashoka had created.

The Forest Peoples and the System's Geographic Limit

The forest peoples — the tribal and semi-tribal communities that Edict XIII addressed with a combination of welfare aspiration and explicit threat of force — represented the dhamma system's most honest acknowledgment of its own boundaries, and their experience during Ashoka's reign illuminates the program's actual functional reach. The empire's ability to administer populations living outside the settled agricultural zones depended on mechanisms that the dhamma program had not replaced and could not replace: periodic military demonstrations of force, the collection of tribute through whatever local intermediaries the

empire could cultivate, and a surveillance of forest peripheries sufficient to detect organized opposition before it developed. The Arthashastra tradition's detailed discussion of forest peoples — how to manage them, how to use them as military auxiliaries, how to reduce their capacity for organized resistance — represents the practical administrative reality of these frontier populations, unmediated by dhamma framing.

The edicts that addressed the forest peoples' welfare were not primarily addressed to those peoples. They were addressed to the settled agricultural and urban populations who read or heard the edicts and whose understanding of the king's dhamma included his concern even for the peoples most difficult to reach. The expression of welfare aspiration toward forest communities served the dhamma program's legitimating function for the majority population even if it had minimal operational reach into the forest communities themselves. This is not deception in any simple sense — there is no reason to think Ashoka's expression of concern for forest peoples was insincere. But its primary governance function was performed at the level of reputation management for the majority population, not at the level of actual administrative provision for the minority. The distinction between these two levels of function is one the framework consistently requires attending to, because they operate through entirely different mechanisms and have entirely different political consequences.

The Sangha Under Pressure: Internal Fracture as Political Vulnerability

The Schism Edict's coercive tone, discussed in Part One, reveals that internal sangha division was a significant enough problem during Ashoka's reign to require imperial intervention. The tradition of the Third Buddhist Council, which Buddhist sources place at Pataliputra under Ashoka's personal sponsorship, represents the sangha's attempt — with imperial support — to establish doctrinal unity and to expel from the monastic community those whose views the council's majority regarded as heterodox. The resulting expulsions sent minority Buddhist communities to various regions of the subcontinent and beyond, a diaspora that the tradition frames as missionary activity but that was also, structurally, the expulsion of internal dissenters from a state-patronized institution trying to maintain the unity the patron required.

The structural vulnerability this created was not visible during Ashoka's lifetime but became apparent immediately after his death. A sangha whose institutional unity had been maintained partly through imperial pressure rather than entirely through voluntary consensus was a sangha whose unity depended on the continued application of that pressure. When the imperial patronage that made compliance with unity requirements advantageous was withdrawn, the suppressed divisions reasserted themselves. The subsequent history of Buddhist sectarianism in India — the proliferation of schools, the doctrinal controversies, the institutional fragmentation — was partly the natural intellectual development of a rich philosophical tradition and partly the reassertion of diversity that had been managed rather than resolved during the Ashokan period. A belief system that requires state coercion to maintain its institutional unity is a belief system whose institutional infrastructure is shallower than its external coherence suggests, and the sangha's post-Ashokan fragmentation confirmed that the unity the Schism Edict had imposed was more administrative than organic.

Applying the Five Conditions: The Analytical Verdict

The question of whether dhamma could have survived Ashoka's death — whether the program had built the institutional infrastructure needed to persist through the political transition that every dynasty eventually faces — can be assessed with unusual precision by applying the five

conditions that the framework identifies as necessary for a belief system to achieve durable institutional presence. The conditions were designed as a checklist for suppression campaigns: when all five are present, suppression succeeds; when any is absent, the target belief survives. Applied in reverse — to the question of whether dhamma had the conditions needed to resist suppression by its political opponents — they provide an equally precise diagnostic.

The first condition is unified elite commitment sustained across generations. Ashoka's personal commitment to the dhamma program was total and multi-decade. His successors' commitment was, by all available evidence, minimal. The Buddhist chronicles name a rapid succession of Mauryan rulers after Ashoka — Kunala, Dasharatha, Samprati, Salisuka, Devavarman, Shatadhanvan, Brihadrata — across the fifty years between Ashoka's death and Pushyamitra's coup. Their individual religious commitments varied, and none is described in the sources as extending Ashoka's dhamma program in any significant way. A program whose institutional existence depends on the personal commitment of a single ruler, and whose mechanism for sustaining that commitment across dynastic succession is limited to the hope that heirs will share the founder's priorities, has built no genuine multi-generational elite commitment. It has built personal commitment with the form of institutional commitment. The first condition was absent from the moment Ashoka closed his eyes.

The second condition is geographic containment of the resistance. The Brahmin community whose material interests the dhamma program had most directly challenged was not a geographically bounded minority that could be isolated from the rest of the population. It was the social fabric of every significant agricultural community across the empire's core territories. Brahmin priests administered household ritual in every village. Brahmin scholars staffed the educational institutions that trained the next generation of administrators and physicians. Brahmin landowners managed agricultural estates across the Gangetic plain. There was no geographic boundary within which this community existed and beyond which the dhamma program operated undisturbed. Geographic containment was not merely absent — it was structurally impossible given the Brahmin community's distributed social integration.

The third condition is target vulnerability: the opposing community must be disorganized, divided, or weak, lacking military capacity and powerful allies. The Brahmin community was none of these things. Its distributed network of gurukulas, temple institutions, and patron-client relationships with landed elites gave it organizational coherence that operated independently of any central institution and was therefore nearly impossible to disrupt through any action short of physical elimination of the community itself. Its alliance with the military aristocracy — the kshatriya social class whose members provided the Mauryan army's officer corps and whose own social position within the varna system depended on the continued operation of the Brahminical framework that assigned them their rank — was structural rather than contingent. Pushyamitra Shunga was himself a Brahmin commanding a kshatriya-officered army: his coup represented the convergence of the two social classes whose institutional interests the dhamma program had most directly challenged. The target was not weak. It was, structurally, the most powerful social coalition in the empire outside the imperial house itself.

The fourth condition is overwhelming and total force: not merely military defeat but complete infrastructure destruction — texts, priests, temples, communities, transmission networks. The dhamma program had no independent military force. The army that might have defended dhamma's institutional interests against the coup was the same army whose commander conducted the coup. Ashoka's personal renunciation of further military conquest after Kalinga had reduced the army's active operational role but had not restructured its command hierarchy in ways that might have created any institutional identity between the military and the dhamma

program. The soldiers who watched Pushyamitra kill Brihadrata were the same soldiers who had carried Ashokan pillars across the empire on imperial commission. Their institutional loyalty was to their commander and their paymaster, not to the moral framework their emperor had inscribed on stone. When the commander changed sides, the military followed, because that is what professional armies do.

The fifth condition is multi-generational persistence: suppression requires decades of sustained commitment, not a single campaign. The dhamma program failed to persist long enough for its opposition to require sustained suppression. Pushyamitra's coup did not require a Shunga inquisition against dhamma because dhamma collapsed on its own — its operational mechanisms ceased to function when the imperial patronage that sustained them was withdrawn, and the decay required no active suppression campaign to complete. The Shunga period's anti-Buddhist activities, documented in Buddhist sources and disputed in detail by modern scholars, were directed at Buddhist institutions rather than at the dhamma program specifically — and this distinction matters analytically. By the time of Pushyamitra's coup, the dhamma program as Ashoka had constructed it was already moribund: without active imperial patronage and dhamma mahamatra administration, the program was a set of stone inscriptions that could no longer be read. What the Shunga period may have suppressed was Buddhist institutional infrastructure — monasteries, monks, the sangha networks — not dhamma as a functioning political program.

None of the five conditions for successful resistance to suppression were met. The analysis predicts collapse, and the collapse was total and rapid. What remains analytically interesting is not the collapse itself, which the framework predicted with the clarity of a structural necessity, but what the collapse produced — the world that was made by the failure.

Section VII: Elite Network Coordination — The Military Substrate Asserts Itself

Who Controlled Organized Violence Throughout

The Mauryan army that Chandragupta had built was a professional standing force of a scale that ancient sources describe, with the appropriate discount for ancient numerical exaggeration, as impressively large: hundreds of thousands of infantry, tens of thousands of cavalry, thousands of war elephants — the combined arms force that had conquered the Nanda dynasty, repelled Seleucus I's attempt to recover Alexander's Indian satrapies, and eventually incorporated virtually the entire subcontinent under a single political authority. This force existed, was continuously maintained and paid, and was commanded through a professional military hierarchy whose authority derived from the chain of command rather than from any ideological commitment to the ruler's governing framework. The Arthashastra tradition's discussion of military administration reflects a state whose relationship to its army was frankly contractual: soldiers were paid professionals, commanders were administrators of organized violence, and the army's loyalty to the ruler was a function of regular payment, effective command, and the calculation of where loyalty was most advantageous, not of theological conviction.

Ashoka's personal renunciation of military campaigning after Kalinga is the most celebrated fact about his reign and, for understanding the military dynamics of the dhamma program's collapse, the most misleading. The renunciation did not disband the army. It did not restructure the command hierarchy. It did not create mechanisms through which the dhamma program's

institutional interests might have become aligned with the military's institutional interests. It simply removed the army from active operational campaigning while preserving the entire apparatus of professional military organization. What it produced, in structural terms, was a large, well-funded, professionally organized military force with nothing to do and no ideological identity connecting it to the governance program of the emperor it served.

The senapati's position in this arrangement was structurally explosive. The commander-in-chief of a standing army that was not campaigning was the most powerful individual in the empire after the emperor himself — more powerful, in terms of actual capacity for organized violence, than the dhamma mahamatras, more powerful than the provincial Rajukas, more powerful than the Buddhist sangha's institutional network, and potentially more powerful than a weakened imperial succession that could not draw on the personal charisma and administrative energy that had sustained Ashoka's authority across a thirty-six year reign. Pushyamitra Shunga's coup was not an aberration. It was the predictable result of the structural position the senapati occupied in a post-conquest empire whose ruler had renounced the military activity that might have kept the command relationship between emperor and commander operationally active.

The Succession Crisis and Its Structural Logic

The rapid succession of Mauryan rulers after Ashoka — the tradition records as many as six emperors in fifty years — was itself a symptom of the structural problem the dhamma program had created rather than solved. Ashoka had governed through a combination of personal charismatic authority (the transformation narrative, the personal visibility through the edict system, the direct communication with his subjects through the mahamatra apparatus) and the institutional framework of the Arthashastra state that he had inherited and not fundamentally changed. Both sources of authority were personal rather than institutional: the charismatic authority died with Ashoka, and the Arthashastra framework's effectiveness depended on having a ruler capable of activating it with the energy and intelligence that Ashoka had brought to it.

His successors were evidently not capable of activating it at comparable intensity. The dhamma program, stripped of Ashoka's personal charisma and the administrative energy that had made it function, became progressively more a set of inscriptions on rock faces and less an operational governance system. The dhamma mahamatras — whose effectiveness had depended on the emperor's attention and the authority that attention conferred — lost their political salience as the imperial center's capacity for sustained oversight declined. The welfare infrastructure required ongoing maintenance that a weakened imperial treasury and a declining administrative capacity could not reliably provide. The stupa construction program required patronage that post-Ashokan rulers either could not or did not continue at Ashokan scale. The belief program became, in the terminology the framework uses, decorative — but it reached Phase 3 of the Decorative Legitimation Lifecycle not through the gradual hollowing-out that the Lifecycle normally describes but through the sudden collapse of the institutional framework on which it depended. There was no Phase 2. Phase 1 ended with Ashoka's death; Phase 3 followed within a generation; Phase 4 — the coup — concluded the trajectory.

The Barmakid Pattern at Smaller Scale

The Shunga coup is recognizable as a pattern that appears across the series of cases this study belongs to, always with the same structural logic. The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid's destruction of the Barmakid family at the height of their administrative power; the various Buyid,

Seljuk, and Mamluk commanders who controlled Abbasid caliphs while maintaining them as legitimating figureheads; Omar al-Bashir's marginalization and eventual house arrest of Hassan al-Turabi once the ideological architect of the Sudan Islamist project had served his political purpose — these are all instances of the same dynamic: when administrative power and military power diverge, military power resolves the tension in its own favor, every time, eventually.

Pushyamitra's coup is a purer instance than most because the ideological program had not even reached Phase 3 before the military resolved the question. In the Abbasid case, the caliphate persisted for centuries in decorative form because Islamic legitimation was too valuable to any successor government to simply discard — the military needed the caliph's religious authority even after it had made the caliph politically impotent. Ashoka's dhamma had not achieved comparable legitimating value for the military class. The kshatriya officer corps had no investment in the dhamma framework; their social identity was embedded in the varna hierarchy that the Brahminical tradition sustained. A Brahmin senapati commanding a kshatriya army in a post-Ashokan court where the dhamma program was fading had no functional reason to preserve an ideology that served neither his social interests nor his institutional ones. The coup required no elaborate justification. The last emperor's weakness was sufficient.

Section VIII: Long-Term Consequences — The World That the Failure Made

The Shunga Restoration and the Reassertion of Brahminical Authority

The Shunga dynasty ruled from approximately 185 to 73 BCE, more than a century, and its reign represents the consolidation of the Brahminical restoration that Pushyamitra's coup had initiated. The extent and systematic character of anti-Buddhist persecution under the Shungas is one of the more contested questions in ancient Indian history. The Buddhist tradition's account — preserved in texts like the Divyavadana and the Ashokavadana — describes Pushyamitra as having offered a bounty of a hundred gold pieces for the head of each Buddhist monk and as having destroyed hundreds of Buddhist monasteries. Modern scholars, including Romila Thapar, treat this account with considerable skepticism: the figures carry the arithmetic of polemic, the account was written by Buddhist institutions with obvious interests in a persecution narrative, and the archaeological record does not straightforwardly confirm a systematic destruction campaign.

The historical reality was probably less dramatic and more structurally significant than the Buddhist persecution narrative suggests. What almost certainly happened under the Shungas was not a coordinated persecution campaign but a systematic reorientation of royal patronage: from Buddhist and Jain institutions toward Brahminical institutions, from dhamma welfare infrastructure toward yajna ceremonial, from the universalist moral framework of the public edicts toward the Brahminical dharmic framework that assigned each social group its appropriate conduct based on varna membership. The Shunga court sponsored the composition or completion of Brahminical texts — the Mahabharata and the Ramayana in forms closer to their present shape are associated with the Shunga period by some scholars — that provided the narrative and moral framework for a restored Brahminical cultural dominance. The dhamma program's logic had been to create a universalist framework that could operate above the sectarian divisions of the Indian religious landscape. The Shunga restoration's logic was to restore the sectarian framework that dhamma had attempted to transcend, and to make the restored framework the basis of royal legitimation.

The Buddhist institutional network did not collapse overnight. Major sites — Sanchi, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya — continued to receive patronage from merchant communities and from regional rulers who found Buddhist institutional presence useful. The Kushana Empire that eventually controlled northern India in the first through third centuries CE was significantly Buddhist in its patronage patterns, and the great monastic universities — Nalanda, Vikramashila, Taxila — developed under post-Ashokan patronage into intellectual centers of international significance. Buddhism persisted in the Indian subcontinent for more than a millennium after Ashoka's death. But the trajectory after the Shunga restoration was one of gradual contraction rather than expansion: the Buddhist institutional network retreating from the Gangetic heartland toward the empire's margins, from the centers of Brahminical social dominance toward the commercial and frontier zones where Brahminical social authority was weaker. The eventual effective elimination of Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent — completed by the destruction of the great monastic universities by Turkic military campaigns in the twelfth century CE — was the culmination of a long trajectory of Brahminical reassertion that the Shunga restoration had set in motion, accelerated by the Muslim conquests that destroyed Buddhism's remaining institutional infrastructure in the one region where it had maintained a significant presence.

The Paradox: Why Failure at Home Produced World Religion Abroad

The most counterintuitive finding in this study — and the one that the framework's analytical tools are best suited to explain — is the relationship between the dhamma program's total failure in its political homeland and the global success of the Buddhist tradition that the program had, in its own way, both advanced and constrained. By any reasonable measure of religious survival and influence, the Buddhism that exists in the world today is an enormously successful tradition: three to five hundred million adherents across Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia; a philosophical tradition that has sustained serious intellectual engagement for twenty-five centuries; institutional networks in countries from Sri Lanka to Japan whose cultural depth and organizational sophistication have proved capable of surviving political upheavals that destroyed the states around them. This success is, in a significant part, a consequence of Ashoka's missionary program. And the missionary program's effectiveness was, in a significant part, a consequence of the distance from Indian state power at which the mission communities established their institutional roots.

The mechanism is visible in the contrast between what Buddhism became in India under state patronage and what it became in the communities where Ashokan missionaries planted it. In India, Buddhist institutional growth under Ashoka was state-dependent: monasteries built with imperial resources, land grants administered through imperial fiscal mechanisms, the sangha's unity maintained partly through imperial coercive pressure. When the state withdrew its patronage, the institutional superstructure it had built had insufficient independent economic foundation to sustain itself. In Sri Lanka, where the tradition records Ashoka's son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta leading a mission that established Buddhism as the island's dominant religious tradition, the Buddhist institutional network developed through the patient accumulation of local royal patronage and lay community support over generations. The Sinhalese Buddhist tradition's institutional roots were not shallower than the Indian tradition's; they were deeper, because they had been built through processes of voluntary community formation rather than through state patronage that could be withdrawn by political decision. The Mahavamsa — the great Sinhalese Buddhist chronicle — records a tradition that understood itself as the authentic custodian of the Buddha's teaching, whose authority derived from the unbroken lineage of teachers tracing back to the Third Buddhist Council, not from the continued existence of any particular political arrangement.

The same pattern holds across the various Buddhist traditions that developed in the communities where Ashokan missionaries reached. Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia; Mahayana Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan; Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet — all of these traditions trace their origins, directly or through chains of transmission, to the missionary activity of Ashoka's period. All of them developed, in their respective cultural contexts, the independent institutional infrastructure that Indian Buddhism had been prevented from developing by its entanglement with the Ashokan state. They developed canons of sacred texts in their local languages or in Chinese translations of Sanskrit originals. They developed indigenous monastic lineages whose authority derived from the transmission of teaching and the maintenance of vinaya discipline rather than from state appointment. They developed patron-lay community relationships embedded in local social structures in ways that made the institutional network resilient to changes in the political arrangements of any particular state. The independence from state power that the missionaries' geographic distance from India enforced became, over generations, an institutional virtue: a tradition that had learned to sustain itself through voluntary community formation rather than through state dependency.

The mechanism behind this pattern is one the framework illuminates directly. State patronage, when it is the primary source of a belief system's institutional resources, creates a stakeholder relationship that amplifies the belief system's reach while making its survival contingent on the political arrangement that provides the patronage. The belief system's survival horizon equals the patron state's survival horizon, and patron states are all mortal. The Buddhism that the dhamma program had colonized — turning the sangha into a state welfare administration vehicle, maintaining its unity through coercive pressure, funding its institutional expansion through imperial patronage rather than through the organic development of community support — was a Buddhism whose survival horizon had been shortened to Mauryan Empire's. When the empire ended, the colonized institutional form ended with it. The Buddhism that escaped colonization by migrating beyond the reach of Indian state power — carried by missionaries into communities where imperial patronage was unavailable and where institutional survival required independent community formation — developed survival horizons that proved, as the subsequent two and a half millennia have demonstrated, considerably longer.

The Constantine Comparison: Similarities, Differences, and What the Framework Reveals

The parallel between Ashoka and Constantine — two rulers of vast empires who adopted minority faith movements as politically significant religions, provided the material and institutional patronage that enabled those religions' subsequent global spread, and have been canonized by the traditions they patronized as paradigmatically pious rulers whose personal faith was the primary motive for their policy — is a standard observation in the comparative history of religion. The framework provides the analytical tools to make the comparison precise in ways that the usual treatment as historical curiosity does not.

The structural similarities are genuine and should not be minimized. Both rulers governed empires of comparable scale facing comparable problems of political and cultural diversity. Both adopted traditions that were minority movements within their empires rather than the dominant religious frameworks: Christianity was a small and socially marginal community within the Roman Empire when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE; Buddhism was one of several competing shramana traditions within a Brahmin-dominated landscape when Ashoka began his patronage program around 260 BCE. Both rulers provided patronage that transformed the material scale of the adopted tradition — funding construction programs,

endowing institutional infrastructure, making state resources available for the tradition's administrative and educational activities — that the tradition could not have funded from its own resources at anything like comparable speed. Both rulers made their personal religious commitments publicly visible through gestures of piety that served political as well as spiritual functions: Ashoka's pilgrimage to Lumbini and his reduction of the village's land tax, Constantine's construction of the great basilicas of Rome and Constantinople and his presidency of the Council of Nicaea. And both rulers initiated missionary programs that carried their adopted traditions into communities far beyond their empires' direct political control, with effects that proved more durable than either ruler's political arrangements.

The critical difference between the two cases — the difference that explains why Christianity survived and consolidated its position in its political homeland while dhamma collapsed within a generation of its founder's death — was not political skill, theological sophistication, or the personal depth of the ruler's religious commitment. It was institutional infrastructure. When Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, Christianity already possessed an episcopal network that had been developing for nearly three centuries: bishops in every major city of the Roman Empire, organized in a hierarchy of authority that could convene councils, resolve doctrinal disputes, and coordinate institutional activity across the empire's full geographic extent without requiring the emperor's personal attention. The Nicene Council that Constantine convened in 325 CE was a gathering of officials from an existing institutional network, not the creation of an institutional network from scratch. The council's decisions had authority because the bishops who made them held offices with established communities of adherents behind them — communities that had been forming and organizing their institutional lives for generations before Constantine provided imperial patronage.

This episcopal infrastructure was independent of imperial authority in a specific and crucial sense: its source of authority was apostolic succession — the chain of ordained authority tracing back to the apostles and through them to Christ — rather than imperial appointment. An emperor could favor particular bishops, fund their construction programs, convene councils to settle disputes. He could not, without destroying the institution's legitimating claim, declare himself the source of episcopal authority. The limits this placed on imperial control of the church were real and would eventually generate centuries of conflict between ecclesiastical and secular authority in medieval Europe. But those limits also meant that the church's institutional existence was not contingent on any particular emperor's continued support. When Julian attempted a pagan restoration after Constantine's death, the Christian institutional network did not evaporate. It weathered the hostile reign because its authority did not derive from imperial patronage in the first place.

Ashoka's dhamma mahamatras were the institutional expression of dhamma, and they were imperial appointees whose authority derived entirely from imperial commission. They had no apostolic succession, no canonical texts whose interpretive authority was recognized independently of the state, no community of lay adherents whose religious identity was embedded in the institutional network rather than in the state's welfare program. The sangha — the Buddhist monastic community — had an independent authority structure based on vinaya discipline and the transmission of teaching. But the sangha was not the dhamma program; it was one of several religious communities that the dhamma program treated as equally honored partners. The dhamma program's institutional expression was the mahamatra apparatus, and that apparatus was the state's administrative extension. Constantine's Christianity had its own institutional legs. Ashoka's dhamma had only the emperor's.

There is a further dimension to the Constantine comparison that the framework's analysis of information control illuminates. Constantine's patronage of Christianity did not require him to invent a new universalist ideology stripped of Christian doctrinal content. He patronized Christianity as Christianity — with its specific claims about the nature of Christ, its sacramental theology, its episcopal governance, its canonical texts. He had to manage the internal diversity of Christian belief, which the Council of Nicaea addressed with limited success and which generated centuries of subsequent controversy. But the institution he patronized had a specific identity and a specific content that created a specific community of adherents whose understanding of themselves was theological rather than merely moral. Dhamma's carefully constructed vagueness — its systematic exclusion of specifically Buddhist content in favor of a universalist moral framework — prevented the development of this kind of community identity. You could not be a dhamma adherent in the way you could be a Christian or a Buddhist: dhamma was a moral attitude, not an institutional membership. And moral attitudes, however sincerely held, do not generate the kind of institutional loyalty that survives the withdrawal of state patronage.

What the Framework Predicted and What the Evidence Confirms

A case study in this series is only analytically valuable if it tests the framework's predictions rather than merely illustrating them. The Ashoka case makes five specific predictions from the analytical framework, and the historical record's confirmation or qualification of each prediction is worth stating explicitly.

The first prediction: invention-based belief systems, lacking pre-existing institutional roots, collapse within a generation of the founding military arrangement's change if they have not established independent institutional infrastructure. The dhamma program was invention-based — the category of dhamma as an imperial governance ideology was new, constructed specifically for the governance problem Ashoka faced, without the pre-existing institutional roots that appropriation-based systems can leverage. The prediction was confirmed completely: the program collapsed within the first generation after Ashoka's death, with the speed and completeness that the absence of independent institutional infrastructure predicts.

The second prediction: the military is the substrate on which all belief-based governance rests, and military resolution of political conflict is the ultimate determinant of outcome when any other mechanism fails. The Shunga coup confirms this with unusual clarity. No ideological competition, no institutional conflict, no theological dispute, no economic grievance determined the outcome. The senapati killed the emperor, and the political arrangement ended. The military did not need to overcome dhamma's institutional resistance because dhamma had no institutional resistance to overcome. But the prediction's core — that military force is the final arbiter — was confirmed in the most straightforward possible way.

The third prediction: elite sincerity is analytically irrelevant to the system's outcome. The dhamma program's collapse was not a consequence of Ashoka's personal commitment being insincere. Every indication in the edicts suggests a man genuinely committed to the moral framework he was inscribing. The collapse was a consequence of structural choices — the failure to create independent institutional infrastructure, the retention of the pre-dhamma military hierarchy, the construction of a belief program whose institutional expression was entirely dependent on the emperor's personal will — that would have produced the same outcome regardless of the depth of Ashoka's personal conviction. Sincere systems fail for structural reasons just as insincere ones do. The framework's insistence on analyzing function rather than

motivation is confirmed by a case in which the motivation appears to have been as genuine as any in the series, and the outcome was as complete a failure as any case produces.

The fourth prediction: the Belief Boundary Cost Differential predicts where systems will fracture, with populations outside the belief's effective domain requiring higher governance costs that create structural pressure on the system. The forest peoples passage in Edict XIII is the clearest expression of this differential in the Ashokan record: the populations furthest from the dhamma system's functional reach required explicit coercive threat rather than moral persuasion, and the edict's acknowledgment of this revealed the system's geographic limit with a frankness unusual in official propaganda. The prediction holds: the system's fracture lines ran precisely where dhamma's effective reach ended and coercion's necessity began.

The fifth prediction — and the one this case contributes most distinctively to the series — is a new formulation that the Ashoka case forces into view. State patronage amplifies a belief system's institutional reach in the short term and may shorten its survival horizon in the long term by making its institutional existence contingent on a political arrangement that is itself mortal. The corollary is that belief systems expelled from state patronage, required to develop independent institutional foundations or die, may develop greater long-term durability than belief systems sustained through state dependency. This prediction is not explicit in the framework's current formulation, because no previous case in the series had provided evidence for it in the form this case provides. The Ashoka case is the entry point for this formulation, and it is confirmed by the subsequent two and a half millennia of Buddhist history: the traditions that developed independent of Indian state patronage proved more durable than the tradition that depended on it.

The Paradox Resolved: Independence as the Condition of Durability

The dhamma paradox with which this study opened — why did a sincere Buddhist king construct an imperial belief system from which Buddhism had been systematically removed? — has an answer that the framework makes visible. Ashoka removed specifically Buddhist doctrinal content from the public edicts because the governance problem he faced required a universalist framework that no community in his empire could identify as their sectarian opponent's advantage. The construction of dhamma as Buddhist ethics without Buddhist theology was the solution to that specific governance problem. But solving that problem required preventing the dhamma program from generating the kind of specific community identity — the community of adherents who understood themselves as dhamma practitioners in the institutional sense — that would have given the program the independent political weight it needed to survive a change in military arrangements.

The deeper paradox is that the same choice that made dhamma maximally useful as a short-term governance instrument made it structurally incapable of long-term survival. A belief framework too vague to generate institutional identity is a belief framework that cannot survive the withdrawal of the institutional patronage that maintained it. And the Buddhism that dhamma had prevented from becoming the state religion — the specifically Buddhist tradition with its sangha, its canon, its vinaya, its specific community of adherents whose institutional identity was Buddhist rather than merely dhamma-moral — turned out to be the form of the tradition that could survive without state dependency, because it had a specific enough identity to generate voluntary institutional loyalty that persisted through political changes.

The historical irony is that Ashoka's most durable contribution to the tradition he personally embraced was not the dhamma program he inscribed on stone but the missionary network he

funded — the sangha communities he sent beyond the reach of Indian state politics into environments where they had to develop independent institutional roots or disappear. The dhamma inscriptions sit in India, legible again after two millennia of being forgotten, read by historians and tourists. The missionary sangha's descendants sit in Rangoon, Bangkok, Kandy, Lhasa, and Kyoto, maintaining practices whose lineages trace back to Ashoka's period through chains of teaching transmission that have outlasted every political arrangement that surrounded them. The belief system that the empire colonized, the empire destroyed. The belief system that the missionaries carried beyond the empire's reach, the world preserved.

Bibliography

Primary Sources in Translation

Ashoka. The Edicts of King Ashoka: An English Rendering. Translated by Bhikkhu S. Dhammika. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993.

Kautilya [attributed]. King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthashastra. Translated and edited by Patrick Olivelle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Kautilya [attributed]. The Arthashastra. Translated by L. N. Rangarajan. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992.

Nikam, N. A. and Richard McKeon, eds. and trans. The Edicts of Ashoka. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

Geiger, Wilhelm, trans. The Mahavamsa, or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon. London: Pali Text Society, 1912.

Strong, John S., trans. and ed. The Legend of King Ashoka: A Study and Translation of the Ashokavadana. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Megasthenes. Indica. Fragments collected and edited in J. W. McCrindle, Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian. London: Trübner, 1877.

The Mauryan Empire: Political and Administrative History

Basham, A. L. The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent Before the Coming of the Muslims. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1954.

Singh, Upinder. A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century. New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008.

Kosambi, D. D. The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.

Allchin, F. R., ed. The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Trautmann, Thomas R. Arthashastra: The Science of Wealth. New Delhi: Penguin Portfolio, 2012.

Ashoka: Scholarship and Interpretation

Thapar, Romila. Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. First published 1961.

Thapar, Romila. Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Allen, Charles. Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor. London: Little, Brown, 2012.

Olivelle, Patrick, Janice Leoshko, and Himanshu Prabha Ray, eds. Reimagining Ashoka: Memory and History. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Strong, John S. The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995.

Mookerji, Radhakumud. Asoka. 3rd ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962.

Hultzsch, E., ed. Inscriptions of Asoka: New Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925. Reprinted Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969.

The Edicts: Analysis and Archaeological Context

Falk, Harry. Asokan Sites and Artefacts: A Source-Book with Bibliography. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 2006.

Salomon, Richard. Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Norman, K. R. 'Asoka and Capital Punishment.' Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 125, no. 1 (1993): 19–28.

Olivelle, Patrick. 'Asoka's Inscriptions as Text and Communication.' In Reimagining Ashoka, edited by Olivelle et al., 151–168. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Coningham, Robin, and Ruth Young. The Archaeology of South Asia: From the Indus to Asoka, c. 6500 BCE–200 CE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

The Arthashastra, Statecraft, and the Political Tradition

Olivelle, Patrick. 'The Arthashastra as a Historical Source: Problems and Possibilities.' In A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, edited by D. T. Potts. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

McClish, Mark. The History of the Arthashastra: Sovereignty and Sacred Law in Ancient India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Boesche, Roger. The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002.

Scharfe, Hartmut. Investigations in Kautilya's Manual of Political Science. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993.

Buddhism in the Mauryan Period and Beyond

Bronkhorst, Johannes. Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Gombrich, Richard F. How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings. London: Athlone Press, 1996.

Lamotte, Étienne. History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śaka Era. Translated by Sara Webb-Boin. Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988.

Schopen, Gregory. Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Dutt, Sukumar. Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Their Contribution to Indian Culture. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962.

Brahminical Religion, Varna, and the Shramana Challenge

Jamison, Stephanie W., and Michael Witzel. 'Vedic Hinduism.' In The Study of Hinduism, edited by Arvind Sharma, 65–113. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.

Olivelle, Patrick. The Ashrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Witzel, Michael. 'Brahmanical Reactions to Foreign Influences and to Social and Religious Change.' In Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE, edited by Patrick Olivelle, 457–499. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Thapar, Romila. 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?' In Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations, 63–104. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978.

The Decline of Buddhism in India

Hazra, Kanai Lal. Buddhism in India as Described by the Chinese Pilgrims, AD 399–689. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983.

Sanderson, Alexis. 'The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period.' In Genesis and Development of Tantrism, edited by Shingo Einoo, 41–349. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, 2009.

Inden, Ronald. Imagining India. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Buddhist Missionary Activity and the Global Spread

Swearer, Donald K. The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Trainor, Kevin, ed. Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Gethin, Rupert. The Foundations of Buddhism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Gombrich, Richard F., and Heinz Bechert, eds. The World of Buddhism. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

The Constantine Comparison: Comparative Imperial Religion

Bowersock, G. W. 'The Aura of Constantine.' In Constantine: History, Historiography and Legend, edited by Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat, 3–12. London: Routledge, 1998.

Drake, Harold A. Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

MacMullen, Ramsay. Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400). New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Rüpke, Jörg. Religion of the Romans. Translated by Richard Gordon. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

Wills, Garry. Font of Life: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Mystery of Baptism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Lieu, Samuel N. C., and Dominic Montserrat, eds. Constantine: History, Historiography and Legend. London: Routledge, 1998.

Barnes, Timothy D. Constantine and Eusebius. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Comparative and Theoretical Frameworks

Tambiah, Stanley J. World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Collins, Steven. Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Pollock, Sheldon. The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Keyes, Charles F., and E. Valentine Daniel, eds. Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Weber, Max. The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism. Translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958.

*****Copyright and Licensing*****

© 2026 Thomas J. Bryan

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

*****You are free to:*****
- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material

*****Under the following terms:*****
- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes

This case study is part of the collection *Patterns of Power: Systematic Analysis of Elite Control Mechanisms Across Civilizations*